

Access to Critical Health Services – Key Messages

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Individual behaviors; physical, social and environmental factors; and effective clinical services all are known to affect the health of individuals and populations. The health system - all public and private components – must ensure availability of, access to, and delivery of health services to address the needs of the population. In the context of Proposed Standards for Public Health and the Public Health Improvement Plan, the Washington State Board of Health has defined “critical health services” for the purposes of ensuring access and improving the population’s health. This set of critical health services is broad-based and is founded on research findings and authoritative thinking of experts who have articulated public health priorities.

The following “headlines” summarize the importance of particular health issues and make the case for attention to these issues by the health system. As described in the menu of Critical Health Services, there are several levels of response to these health issues: screening/testing, education/counseling, and intervention at the individual level, and infrastructure and policy development at the system level. The menu indicates which level of intervention has been identified as important in response to the specific health issue. These summary “headlines” are a sampling of the rationale for naming a set of critical health services; all critical health services supported by research and expert opinion are not addressed here. See the “Recommended Critical Health Services for Washington State Residents”, adopted September 13, 2000 by the State Board of Health.

Health Risk Behaviors

- **Tobacco Use:** Smoking is the single most preventable cause of disease and death in the United States, resulting in more annual deaths than AIDS, alcohol, cocaine, heroin, homicide, suicide, motor vehicle crashes, and fires combined. More than 430,000 adults die from tobacco-related causes per year. Direct annual medical costs attributable to smoking are at least \$50 billion.
- **Injury & Violence Prevention:** More than 400 Americans die daily from injuries including motor vehicle crashes, firearms, poisoning, suffocation, falls, fires, and drowning. The risk of injury is great enough that most persons will sustain a significant injury some time during their life. The cost of injury and violence in the U.S. is estimated at \$225 billion per year, an increase of 42% over the last decade. Total societal costs include direct medical care, rehabilitation, and productivity losses; for motor vehicle crashes alone, this exceeds \$150 billion annually.
- **Physical Activity:** Regular physical activity directly contributes to a physically healthy body, psychological well-being, and prevention of premature death; it also lowers risks for developing diabetes, colon cancer, and high blood pressure. In 1997, only 15% of adults engaged in a recommended amount of physical activity and 40% of adults were involved in no leisure-time physical activity.

- **Responsible Sexual Behavior & Sexually Transmitted Diseases:**

- Half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned or unwanted at time of conception. Such **unintentional pregnancies** occur most frequently among women 20 and younger, women 40 and older, and low-income African American women.
- 15 million new cases of **sexually transmitted diseases** are reported each year; 4 million of these occur in adolescents.
- The majority of **HIV** infections occur through sexual behavior. Although some progress was made in decreasing the incidence of new cases, recent studies suggest an upsurge in the rate of new cases. Between 700,000 and 900,000 people are currently affected with HIV in the U.S.

Communicable and Infectious Diseases

- **Immunizations for Vaccine Preventable Diseases:** Vaccines, noted as a great public health achievement, have controlled or nearly eradicated diseases such as smallpox and polio. Vaccines for common childhood illnesses are highly effective in preventing disease, disability, and death, and in controlling spread of infections within communities. As of 1998, 73% of children were fully immunized according to universal vaccine recommendations. Immunizations against influenza and pneumococcal disease can prevent serious illness and death; such deaths together are the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S. Yet 1997 immunization rates for adults 65 and older were 63% for influenza and 43% for pneumococcal vaccine.

Maternal, Infant, & Child Health / Development

- **Prenatal Care:** The use of alcohol, tobacco, and illegal substances during pregnancy is a major risk factor for low birth weight and poor infant outcomes. Prenatal care affords an opportunity to identify women who have these behaviors or other risk factors and to take steps to reduce risks, thereby helping to improve infant and maternal outcomes.
- **Newborn & Early Childhood Services:** Compelling research indicates that screening, counseling, and intervention in the first three years of life – particularly in children of high-risk families – can lead to notable improvements in physical, emotional, and developmental health of children.

Behavioral & Mental Health

- **Substance Abuse:** Alcohol and illicit substance use are associated with serious health and social problems, including violence, injury, HIV infection, unwanted pregnancy, and family disruption. The associated annual economic costs are nearly \$300 billion. Adolescent experimentation with a variety of illicit substances continues stubbornly. The younger a person becomes a habitual user, the stronger the addiction and more difficult it is to stop use.

- **Mental Health:** About one-fifth of the U.S. population is affected by mental illness in a given year. More than 19 million adults suffer from depression, which is the leading cause of disability and causes two-thirds of suicides each year. In 1997, only 23% of those diagnosed with depression received treatment.

Cancer

- **Cancer** is the second leading cause of death in the U.S. In 1999, more than 1.2 million people were diagnosed with some form of cancer. Lung, prostate, breast, and colo-rectal cancers are the most common. Cancer prevention, early detection through screening, and effective therapy are important factors in improving the prospects for surviving cancer.

Chronic Conditions

- **Diabetes:** Approximately 2,200 new cases of diabetes are diagnosed each day in the U.S. It is a costly disease at around \$100 billion per year and with a major toll on the health status of those with the disease. Diabetes is the leading cause of non-traumatic amputations, blindness among working age adults, and end-stage renal disease. These and other associated health problems contribute to substantial disability and impairment in quality of life.
- **Heart Disease:** Heart disease is the leading cause of death for all Americans. Coronary heart disease accounts for the largest proportion of heart disease, affecting about 12 million in the U.S. Prevention strategies are known to be effective against heart disease, as are risk factor detection and early intervention.

Key Source Consulted in Identification of “Headline” Comments:

1. Healthy People 2010 (HP2010), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, January 2000